Researching objects and spaces

Peter Collins, University of Durham

In this exploration on ways of researching the material culture of religion I will begin by presenting a number of ‘prefatory remarks’ which will serve to underpin what I have to say in the rest of the paper. I will go on to describe a variety of ways in which religious architecture can be read and therefore interpreted. Although my focus is on the materiality (and especially the space and place) of religious faith and practice, as a social anthropologist, I will touch on a number of methods discussed in other papers on this website, including ethnography, visual methods, and choosing and combining various methods. I have tried to achieve a balance between breadth and depth, and have tried to focus on issues that I hope will be both useful and interesting to all those who are researching religion and spirituality. But first, those prefatory remarks.

First, it is worth indicating the range of issues that one might include under the rubric ‘material religion’ or the ‘religious environment’:

- built environment
- non-built environment
- division of space
- control over space
- spatial metaphors
- movement
- pilgrimage
- diaspora
- power & authority
- routes
- embodiment
- the senses
- aesthetics
- social change
- ritual
- texts
- occupation of space
- ritual objects
- quotidian objects
- symbolism
- status and power
- buildings
- fabrication
- gifts/donations/charity
- identity/boundary markers
- emotionality
- iconography
- texts
- aesthetics
- relics
- iconography
This certainly is not intended to be a definitive list and you will probably be able to come up with many more relevant and interesting topics.

Second, before we begin research on ‘religious’ subjects we might well ask ourselves whether we are primarily interested in ‘religion’ or more generally in ‘social interaction’, that is in what people do and what they say they do. Is it possible, in any case, for either the researcher or those researched, to separate off ‘the religious’ from the rest of life. In any case, my premise in much of what follows is that practice precedes belief. This is hardly a novel standpoint and it has been elaborated recently by David Morgan in his Introduction to the book Religion and Material Culture (2009), who sets out the problem thus:

The academic study of religion in the modern West has been shaped by the idea that a religion is what someone believes, which consists of a discrete, subjective experience of assent to propositions concerning the origin of the cosmos, the nature of humanity, the existence of deities, or the purpose of life. When seeking to understand a religion, scholars have long tended to ask: what are its teachings? (2009:1)

He goes on to argue that we in ‘religious studies’ have dwelt for too long on the ‘teachings’ of religious leaders and too little on what adepts, ordinary people for the most part, actually do:

Insisting that any religion consists of the affirmation of a salient corpus of beliefs is a reductionism that does violence to the particularity and diversity of human religions by imposing a rigid template on them. (2009: 2).

What, then, should we focus our attention when we are researching religion and spirituality? Morgan is articulate in his view – and it is one with which I entirely concur:

Therefore, instead of asking, ‘what does a religion teach?’ we might focus on the social and interpersonal relations that characterise practitioners of a religion [and why not also those who profess to practice no religion?]. (2009: 6, the text in the square brackets is mine)

But what has this got to do with the material culture of religion? Morgan is typically forthright and articulate in his response;

The habit of feeling certain [of believing] is something [s]he has practised over and over...they were the iteration of familiar feelings packaged and evoked and regularly rehearsed in the techniques of the body that [s]he acquired from the earliest moments of his family and communal life...All of this slowly sedimentary practice of belief, built up over the course of his life and inflected with the feelings toward his family and friends and community, endlessly repeated, tirelessly educating the ear, the eye, the palate, the body’s schemes of posture and gesture.
And he goes on to cite the prominent American anthropologist of religion, Webb Keane:

Reeligions may not always demand beliefs but they will always involve material forms (2009: 8).

And there we have: the significance of materiality for the study of religious lies in its necessary presence in all matters religious. It is difficult to disagree with Morgan and his paper is certainly worth reading and re-reading by those of us interested in religion regardless of our particular field of interest.

Third, although it may appear the dwelling on the materiality of religion commits one to a rather too narrow theoretical focus, this is not the case. Let me list those theories (and exemplar theorists) whose work might profitably be applied to the subject:

- cognitive theory (H. Whitehouse)
- practice (P. Bourdieu)
- structuration (A. Giddens)
- narrative (J. Bruner)
- symbolic interaction (E. Goffman)
- psycho-analysis (G. Lynch, in Morgan, 2009)
- post-human theory (R. Pepperell)
- actor-network theory (B. Latour)
- historical-comparative (B. Fletcher)
- hermeneutics (L. Jones)
- semiology (Lukken & Searle, U. Eco)

I will return to discuss some of these in greater detail below. Once again, it is probable that some of you will have drawn on others whose work might be equally relevant and useful.

Fourth, social research methodology refers to a combination of data collection methods and a theoretical approach, more or less articulately, and consciously presented. Regardless of the focus of one’s interests, one should commence by asking a few basic but necessary questions: How am I going to collect data? Why? What kind of theory am I developing? Why? In other words, a certain reflexivity is demanded of us. Let us be clear about the ontology of the phenomenon (phenomena) we are studying, and the kind of knowledge we are endeavouring to produce. As an example, let me present the kinds of assumptions I make in my own work (which has a symbolic interactionist bias):

- meaning is central
- the primary source of humanness is the social
- the social is a dynamic process
- social action is (primarily) voluntaristic
- the self is dialectically constituted
human action is emergent (in practice)
sympathetic introspection can be useful in understanding human interaction
narrative is central to social life

These are the assumptions I generally begin with – can you identify yours?

Fifth, fieldwork-based research, and perhaps all social research, is primarily about people and since people exist in space we cannot, as researchers avoid spatial issues. Similarly, the material world is ever present (as I have argued, drawing on Morgan 2009, above). Although the organisation of space and the materiality of religion may not always be the primary objects of our research there is no religion that entirely ignores either places or things. In describing both space and things, we can talk about ‘the environment’, which may of course be either the built environment or the natural environment – as far as environments can be ‘natural’.

Sixth, although my brief is to concentrate on ‘spaces and things’ I am aware that attention should also be given to issues of time and temporality. Even after a moment’s thought, it becomes clear that ‘time’ is as important as ‘space’, though I suspect that of the two, time is, in the context of religion, even less researched. The understanding an adept has of time in the broadest sense has a major influence on both their faith and practice. Consider the reasons why social practice gave rise to concepts such as the timelessness of God, reincarnation, the afterlife, heaven and hell, creation, and the extent to which time is understood to be linear or cyclical – concepts that are represented in various ways in the environment of religion. Furthermore, there are aspects of duration and repetition that play a fundamental role in ritual and other religious practice. Although my job here is to draw attention to the importance of the materiality of space and place, I do not want to seem to be denying the significance of issues or time and temporality.

Seventh, regardless of your particular interest in religion I would urge you to reflect on your own use of space and relationship with the material world. And when carrying out fieldwork, a paper and pencil is still the most useful set of tools. Note the way space is organised and the distribution of material things. You would be wise to collect this data if you have the opportunity – partly because it might inform your primary research and also because you may want to return to the subject some time in the future.

In summary, the significance of material culture – and especially of space and place, in studies of religion has too often been underestimated. Don’t make the same mistake – pay attention to space and place and the materiality of religious practice. And remember, space is always and already social.

Having set out these ‘prefatory remarks’, I will go on, now, to consider a number of approaches to the study of religious space. I shall begin with a consideration of what we might call the comparative method, before going on to consider semiotic, hermeneutic and
narrative ‘readings’ of religious space. In all this I shall be drawing on my own fieldwork among British Quakers and their meeting houses.

The Comparative Method
My own research on British Quakerism, employing an ethnographic approach, began slowly and rather frustratingly. Initial progress was entirely serendipitous. I had been asked to

Fig 1. Meeting House and Parish Church

show a party of school children (sixth formers) around the Quaker meeting house and before taking them inside asked them to look at the building and tell me what they saw. One bright girl remarked how different the meeting was to the Anglican Parish Church that towered above it. And so I began the serious though enjoyable task of comparing the two buildings.
For many the comparative method is the ‘default setting’ (e.g. Fletcher 1954) in the analysis of architecture. The focus on the structure and history (style) in which description of the parts (plan, walls, openings, roof, columns etc) of the building and taken together, of its genre. The comparativist concentrates on ‘influences’ using historical and geographical criteria in particular, with a view to compares typical examples. For instance, the way in which the zig zag helps define the Romanesque (Fig 2). As an anthropologist, I am naturally inclined towards comparison, which although not quite a theory, is a step in the right direction. I began to look at the ways in which Quakerism and Anglicanism were related from a historical perspective. The Quaker movement grew up during the 1640s at a time of social, political and religious upheaval, defining itself against the Established Church (Anglicanism). Quakers refused to pay tithes (church taxes), campaigned again the idea of a paid clergy, were against all wars, encouraged women to preach, believed in a universal and imminent God, and were politically levelling and espoused plain living. The Quakers identified themselves against Anglicanism: the Quaker was what the Anglican was not – and this is clearly evident in the contrasting architectural styles of the two buildings (See Fig 1), despite the fact that one was built 150 years before the other.
When interviewed the architect described the building in typically modernist terms, emphasizing the flat surfaces, large windows and absence of ornamentation (as a neo-gothic building the parish church is highly ornamented, but such ornamentation is also an Anglican characteristic). He explained the shape of the raking roof in purely practical terms – as a cheap way of ensuring rapid run-off of rain.

If we consider the interior of the meeting house, we find that it is, again, primarily functional (Figs 4 and 5).
Why is the interior space divided as it is? The largest space, by area, is the Concourse, an area which connects the ground floor rooms. It is primarily a social space, an area where Quakers gather before and after meeting for worship on a Sunday morning. The meeting room itself is square (parish churches are typically cruciform, see Fig. 6) and the building as a whole is not aligned on any particular axis (parish churches have an east-west orientation). About 10% of the space is given over to what might be thought of as sacred space (although Quakers deny the sacred/profane dichotomy) There is much else to say about the way interior space is structured but I will leave you to apply your own analysis.
It can be argued, convincingly, that the architecture of the parish church has changed considerably in recent decades – with architects experimenting, for example, with different floor plan (see Fig 7). Though the interior remains largely unchanged in many cases (Fig 8). How can we account for these changes and what do they tell us about developments in religious faith and practice in the UK and elsewhere?
Fig. 6. (Cruciform) Plan of typical parish Church

Fig 7. Modern Parish Church
The semiotic approach

Semiotic readings focus on signs. A sign is something that is made to stand for something else and it is important to remember that anything can serve as a sign. A sign comprises a signifier (the form the sign takes) and the signifier (the thing or concept represented by the sign). A cluster of signs is a sign system (sometimes called a code); food, dress, and architecture can be considered sign systems. For an excellent semiotic analysis of a single church see Lukken & Searle (1993).

Broadly speaking if we reconsider the meeting house (MH) and parish church (PC) we can summarise their relationship as follows: MH = ~ PC. That is, the meeting house is just what the parish church is not. The American anthropologist James Boon calls this ‘playing the vis-à-vis’ and we compare the two forms in terms of binary oppositions. Let us return briefly to the buildings’ external forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PC</th>
<th>MH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vertical</td>
<td>horizontal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clock</td>
<td>no clock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weather vanes</td>
<td>no weather vanes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stained glass</td>
<td>clear glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marked boundary</td>
<td>ambivalent boundary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elaborate entrance</td>
<td>plain entrance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>winding path (distance)</td>
<td>no path (proximity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explicit religious symbolism</td>
<td>absence of religious symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elaborate</td>
<td>plain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What do these architectural oppositions tell us about Anglicanism, Quakerism and the relation between them? Quite a lot, I would argue. If architecture is treated as a code, the messages it encodes (about identity and belonging, about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries for instance) are likely to be apparent in the social relations being expressed.

The hermeneutical approach
The third reading of religious space draws on the hermeneutical tradition of Gadamer and others and best represented recently by Lindsay Jones (2000). In taking a hermeneutic approach one is looking primarily at the meaning of specific religious environments we focus on the constituent parts of particular religious spaces in order better to understand the whole; the better one understands the whole, the clearer become the relations between the parts. Jones (2000) is especially interested to explore the relationship between what he calls ritual events and the build environment. Again, the approach is predicated both on the value of comparison and classification (or taxonomy). Jones argues that buildings are not static but dynamic and must be understood in association with the religious events which take place in and around them: these he calls ritual-architectural events (RAE). These comprise a front half that is formal, traditional and reassuring, and a back half that is informal and innovative. The RAE manifests three functions. First, architecture as orientation (I), involving the instigation of RAEs through homology (Ia), convention (Ib) and astronomy (Ic) - each of which are sub-divided. Second, architecture as commemoration (II), the content of RAEs, including divinity (IIa), sacred history (IIb), politics (IIc) and the dead (IId) –sub-divided into further categories. Thirdly, architecture as ritual context (III), including elements of theatre (IIia), contemplation (IIib), propitiation (IIic), and sanctuary (IIId) – each of which are again subject to further sub-division. Jones’ approach is clearly articulated and systematic. In applying his classificatory schema to the Quaker ritual-architectural event I find that the most relevant categories are homology (Ia) in that the organisation of meeting room space mimics to a large extent the universe as Quakers would like to see it (primarily non-hierarchical); politics (IIc), in so far as the meeting house is characterised by a levelling aesthetic; and finally, contemplation (IIib) in that the meeting room, is a plain, uncluttered space in which silence is valorised. If we analysed Anglican (or Muslim, Hindu, or Jain) religious space in the same way we would arrive at a very different classificatory schema. Jones is clear that his schema is exploratory rather than encyclopedic, but I would agree with him that it represents a useful tool in the interpretation of religious space.

The narrative approach
Finally, there are advantages in attempting to understand the religious environment in terms of narrative. For example, I came to understand the Quaker meeting better as it slowly dawned on me that the space of the meeting house (and therefore the meeting itself) was storied. Just as anything can be a sign, so everything can be woven into a story. The lives of members of the meeting were a part of the fabric of the building; the books in the library,
the furniture, the pictures, posters and notices on the wall, the plants in the garden. Quakers who belonged to the meeting would discuss and debate before and after meeting and it was at such times that their stories would be shared and communicated, and the environment in which they came together was often a central component of those stories. On the wall at one end of the concourse hung a small framed tapestry (See Fig 9). The picture represented the history of the meeting and every member of the meeting (including children) contributed to its construction, over the course of several years. The tapestry perfectly represents the materialisation of narrative in a religious environment. Naturally, different environments will evoke and facilitate different kinds of stories. In the Quaker case, the faith and practice of individuals and of the group are inscribed in the fabric of the meeting house. It has to be said that the discovery of these stories is most likely to require long-term fieldwork, or very carefully planned semi-structured interviewing.

![Image of Meeting House (Concourse)](image)

**Fig 9. Meeting House (Concourse)**

In order to uncover these narratives I paid very careful attention to the minutiae of material culture within the meeting house, mapping every detail (see Fig 10).
I noted, wherever I could, the relationships that existed between participants in the Quaker meeting and objects found/displayed in and around the building. One interesting discovery, was the significance of relationships between individuals which were generated and partly sustained by elements of the meeting’s material culture: the garden for example.

The internal of the organisation revolved not only around the narratives of individuals but also of Quakerism itself, as a historical entity. The meeting room was arranged in a particular way, the chairs in a circle for example (Fig 11). You will remember that Quakerism was from the outset a levelling movement, a movement that eschewed social hierarchy. The circle best represents a levelling worldview – no individual is marked out as raised up above any other. In this way, the organisation of the space re-prepresents a central component of the Quaker story. Ask yourselves what stories other forms of religious space tell.
Fig 11. Organisation of the Meeting Room (field sketch in which the lines represent rows of chairs)

Bob Hillier (1984) has described a method for further analysing the internal structure of built environments (though the same methods could be employed in the study of natural environments). He indicates that environments are sub-divided into spaces that indicate lesser and greater ‘depth’. Each threshold delivers a person into another space which might or might not be deeper than the last. Whereas those who belong to meeting range freely across all thresholds, those who are merely visiting do not. Depth of belonging can be gauged (at least approximately) by depth of circulation within the building. Again, you might assess the usefulness of this theory/method in your own research, where it is possible.

Here, then, are four different (though partially overlapping) ways of ‘reading’ a religious environment: the historical-comparative method, the semiotic (or structuralist) approach, the hermeneutic method, and a composite method based primarily on the assumption that narrative is central to social life. There are others, and often a combination of several is likely to generate the best analysis. Here is an under-researched field which might enrich your own research, regardless of its specific focus: try and become ‘environment-sensitive’. Let us be aware, in any case, of our assumptions, our theoretical and methodological predispositions before we embark on fieldwork.
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Other relevant online resources:

http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/Seamon_reviewEAP.htm

http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/place/

http://sacredsites.com/ (Huge bibliography and great photographs)

http://www.gardenvisit.com/history_theory/garden_landscape_design_articles/sacred_gardens

http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/builtheritage/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_architecture

http://www.ece.lsu.edu/kak/Time2.pdf

http://www.blia.org/english/publications/booklet/pages/34.htm